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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses strategies which can help the admissions officer/registrar be more effective in having his program plans transformed into reality. The program planning process is considered from three prospectives beginning with a brief discussion of the current state of program development in higher education. It is conjectured that the present financial squeeze is likely to continue for the next decade and consequently it will be difficult to obtain financial resources for new programs and there will be pressure for more effective management of resources. Though growth may be slowed, a number of positive incentives may emerge from these conditions. The next section examines the necessary preparation within the admissions and registrar's offices and it is proposed that this preparation include a critical evaluation of current operations including organizational goals, patterns of staffing, contributions of technology, and adequacy of procedures. The final section discusses yardsticks likely to be applied in the evaluation of program plans. Examples are: (1) Does the past performance of the admissions officer/registrar inspire trust in his ability? (2) Is the program clearly constructed and alternatives provided? and (3) Does the program further the overall goals of the institution? (RSM)

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STRATEGIES FOR ACTION: AN OUTLINE OF FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE DECISIONS ON PROGRAM PLANS

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STRATEGIES FOR ACTION: AN OUTLINE OF FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE DECISIONS ON PROGRAM PLANS

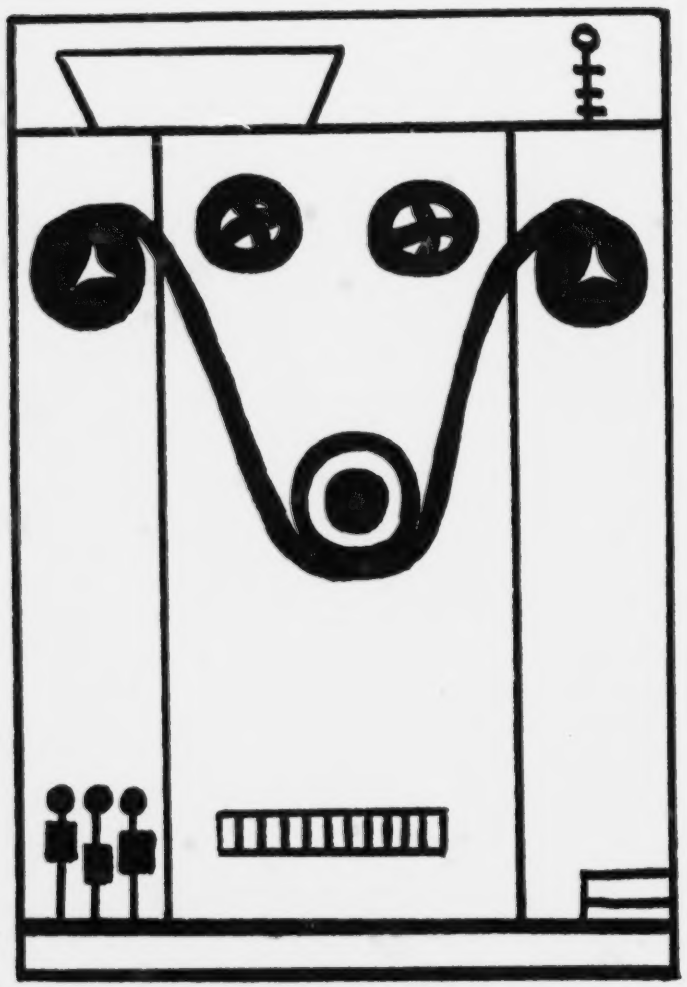
How do you translate an idea from the realm of aspiration to the realm of action? This is a question confronted at least once each year by admissions officers/registrars as they prepare their budgetary plans for review. The question is more than rhetorical to those in the profession who want to improve the services of our admissions and registrar offices.

A dispassionate observer of the admissions and records scene in institutions over the country would no doubt see varying degrees of success in transforming plans into reality. Some offices seem to be especially well equipped and organized, while others appear to struggle along with quill pens and green eye shades still the vogue. What makes the difference? Obviously, there are a number of factors which come to focus on this question. One of these most certainly has to be the professional competence and personality of the one who has the responsibility for the admissions and records function. But he also works within an institutional framework of other personalities and activities which compete for limited resources.

How can the energetic admissions officer/registrar convince the Vice President that he needs another full-time clerk, a new rotary file,

Figure 1.

Past And Present In Registrar Environments



a computer terminal? Concern over this question has generated this particular part of the 1971 AACRAO program plan. The goal of this particular program is an imminently practical one. It is to consider factors which can help the admissions officer/registrar be more effective in having his program plans received favorably. Our presentation has been designed on a foundation of both scholarship and experience. In the three brief presentations of the program, we hope to present both theoretical and applied illustrations of those factors which can shape the evaluation of program ideas. We will not attempt to present a simplistic formula for success, but instead will try to illuminate variables relevant to the problem and explore strategies for maximizing success.

For this introductory paper, our goal is a modest one. We propose to explore in a general but concrete way those factors which enter into the decision process for new program ideas. To meet this goal, our discussion will unfold as follows. We will consider the program planning process from three perspectives, beginning with the briefest of looks at the current state of program development in higher education in gerneral, proceeding then to an examination of preparation necessary within our own offices, and moving finally to an outline of those factors which are likely to be active as our program plan is evaluated with other program proposals.

HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY: SUMMONS TO ACCOUNTABILITY

A phrase appearing in The Outputs of Higher Education: Their Measurement and Evaluation, a recent publication of the WICHE Management Information System project, suggests that the higher education community is being "summoned to accountability." This phrase concisely and forcefully captures the spirit of the times in higher education today.

Though there are obvious diversities in pattern, we have enjoyed for the most part a rather affluent period in higher education over the past ten years or so. That this is true is reflected in part by the data of Figure 1. Note that expenditure and appropriation patterns have generally exceeded percentage growth in number of students. However, even the briefest review of current public and professional literature reveals that current conditions do not predict a similar financial trajectory for the next decade.

For example, a recent report released by the Carnegie Commission revealed that approximately two thirds of a weighted sample of 2,340 institutions were either headed for financial trouble or were already in financial difficulty. In my own city of Memphis, the reality of the fiscal stress became more apparent as one of our small private colleges announced plans to close their doors at the end of this year.

The current financial squeeze is forcing some colleges out of business and causing most all colleges to sharpen their sense of

Figure 2.

Summons To Accountability

Figure 3.

Growth In Enrollment And Appropriations

	1959-1960	1969-1970	Percent Increase
Enrollments	3,571,000	7,978,000	123.42%
Appropriations	$1,399,904,000	$6,123,084,000	337.39%

educational identity. Complicating the financial press are other pressures from sources both internal and external--pressures concerning role, patterns of governance, quality of instruction and service, and utilization of resources.

Now what does all of this mean to those of us who operate deeper within the institutions? A knowledge of the changing character of the interaction of our institutions with the external environment is an essential foundation to the preparation of program plans for our particular activity. The inferences are clear:

(1) We can expect to have a more difficult time in obtaining financial resources for new program ideas.

(2) There will be greater pressures fo, more effective management of our resources.

But we need not receive these points in a pessimism which immobilizes our energy and intellect. Though our growth may be slowed, there are a number of positive incentives which emerge from these conditions. Certainly there is nothing wrong with having to take a hard look at our resource utilization. If we are good educational managers, we would have been doing this all along anyway. Other frontiers await our attention. To engage the hard value questions which will sharpen our institutional identity, and the role of our offices, offers a challenge of high quality.

PRELUDE TO PLANNING: INTROSPECTION

With a clearer view of the higher education scene in mind, let us now shift quickly to a perspective more familiar--our own operation. The planning and presentation of new program ideas must be preceded by a critical introspection of current operation. As a specific example of the need for such introspection, let me present the following.

During a recent operating year, the writer knows of two institutions similar in role, student mix, program character, and community environment. However, the diversity in admissions/registrar budgetary patterns between these two institutions was extraodinarily great. In one, the total clerical and professional staff was approximately three times the staff of the second. Differences in size of staffing and other needs was principally responsible for one institution having an admissions/registrar operating budget of over a million dollars while the other had an operating budget of just over three hundred thousand.

Now comparisons of this kind are hazardous indeed. We have said nothing about the quality of services offered--though further explication of the matter would probably reveal that the quality of services in the more expensive office would not reach that of the lower operating budget. Even when we make allowances for differences in cost of living, and perhaps for some minor differentials in functional activities, there remains a serious question as to why the budgetary patterns are so different.

However, the careful scrutiny of a competent colleague revealed a number of dysfunctional organizational problems, including excessive fragmentation of job specialities and illogical structures for task accomplishment. A severe case of management myopia can produce similar unproductive drains on the resources of our institutions and thus deny support to other programs which need these resources.

The admissions officer/registrar is a manager not only of information but of a broader array of both human and material resources. To be an effective educational manager demands sensitivity to management concepts. This is neither the time nor the place to launch into an exploration of these concepts, but there is no lack of opportunity for the professional who really wants to improve. AACRAO has been very active in providing such training opportunities. Attendance at one of the MODS II seminars now being held over the country can go a long way toward providing the kind of knowledge I am talking about.

To provide a helpful yet concise approach to the program planning process, I have elected to cast our discussion here in the form of four questions. If you will weigh each of these in your program planning, I believe that you will find yourself in a more favorable state of readiness.

(1) Have you carefully delineated operational goals for your office and related the activities of your various office functions to these broader goals?

How can you plan a budget or a new program without knowing what it is that your office or activity exists to accomplish? And how can you

Figure 4.

Careful Identification of Operational Goals

know what kind of job you're doing unless you have some bench mark against which to measure your progress? These are obvious questions perhaps, but the need for more "direction reflection" is acutely illustrated in the inertia developed by college administrators who are maintenance oriented, who dash about here and there squirting a drop of oil to keep their machinery running, and whose principal involvement can best be described as administrative clucking.

What new goals should we be prepared to meet next year? What old responsibilities can be discarded? Are we efficiently organized to service obsolete goals? Just a little attention to the business of defining direction can help us acquire the appropriate resources and measure our accomplishment. Recent scholarship in this particular area can be found in materials on management by objectives and program budgeting. I commend these and other references to your attention. However, when you have distilled the scholarship of all that has been written, you come fundamentally to these critcal questions:

(1) What are the goals which our activity exists to serve?

(2) Are these goals in harmony with broader institutional goals?

(2) Have you looked critically at your staffing patterns?

We will have taken an important step if we first define the operational goals of our offices. But there are always a number of alternatives available for accomplishing goals. We want to find the

Figure 5

Critical Examination of Staffing Patterns

one which will maximize the service impact of the resources available. An illustration may assist us in driving this point home.

Suppose for the moment that we need forty manhours of routine filing to be done each week. Would it be better to hire a full-time clerk to do this for us, or would it be better to hire four student workers, each of whom might work a couple of hours a day. While there are a number of variables which could make the decision go either way, some reflection might reveal several advantages associated with student employment. The probability is that a full-time clerk would soon grow bored with such a restricted task. The associated by-products would likely appear as restricted productivity and the contagion of bad morale spreading over your office. Not only would student workers be more likely to give you the full two hours work, since they could escape from the boredom after that brief period, they would probably enjoy the association with your office and cost you less in salary dollars.

The ability to harmonize tasks and people in a way which is challenging to our staff and efficient in resource utilization is the mark of the true administrative artist. Too often we get caught up in the "growth ethic." More students mean more clerks. You're not really doing anything unless you're growing in size. The competent educational manager will reject these notions and focus instead on the quality of his staffing patterns. This reflection may reveal the need for additional staff, but it may well uncover novel or unique ways for reorganizing our current staff.

(3) Have you taken advantage of current technology?

Admissions officers/registrars have always been fascinated with technology. Consider the following merits of technology: In one scheduling office an alert colleague eliminated the need for one full-time clerical person by translating the laborious job of scheduling rooms on white poster board to the computer, which could handle the job more accurately, faster, and with greater efficiency. The acquisition of a transcript validator in one registrar's office enabled a growing college to meet an increased demand for transcript service with the same size staff. In a small state college, the automation of the admissions process provided better service to applicants and resulted in a substantial savings of money and personnel.

Not all products of technology are positive, however. Will we adopt a new machine or product simply in the name of sophistication without critical reflection on the improvement in service for the cost involved? An optical scanner may operate very well at Turtle Pond College. But this does not mean "ipso facto" that you should have one, or need one, at Nutbush University. Will that new rotating file really do the job better than some other less expensive filing system? While we must resist our proclivity to gadgetry, we will want to consider the positive contributions of technology in the improvement of our services.

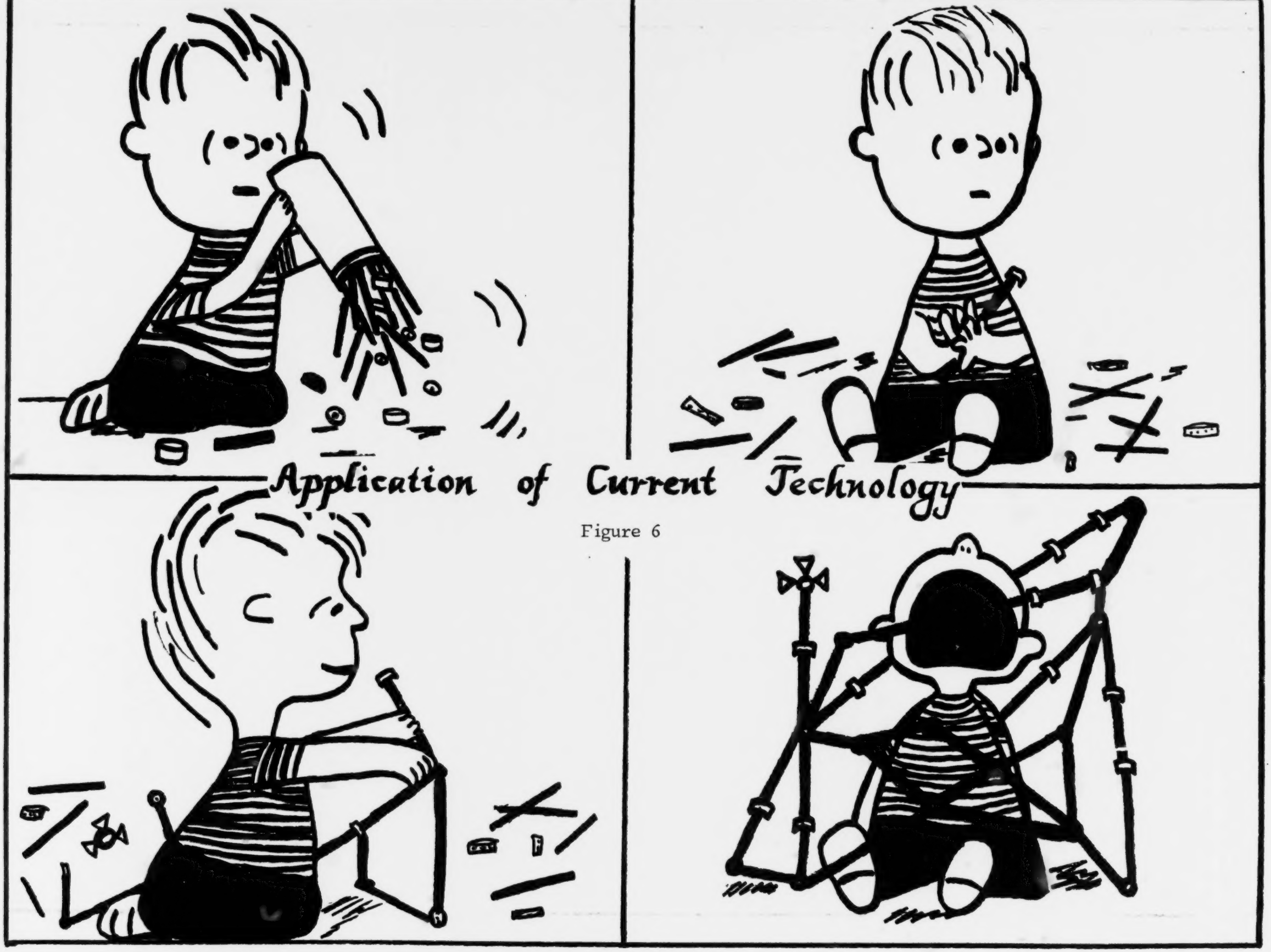


Figure 6

(4) Have you inspected the procedures by which you deliver both staffing and personnel to tasks to be performed?

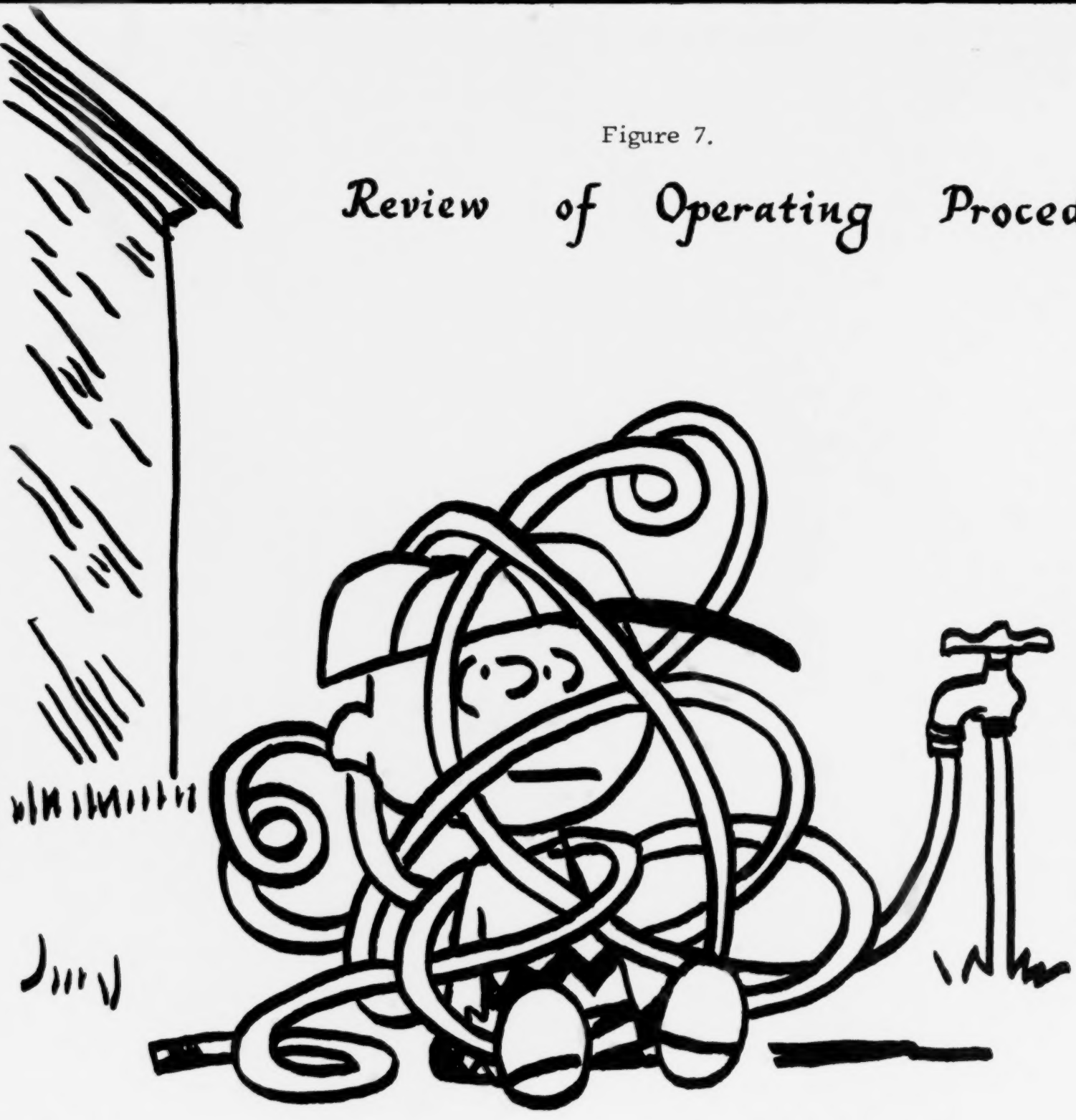
By a slight shift in procedure a registrar reduced by half the time needed in grade posting at the end of each semester with no change in equipment or staff needed to accomplish the job. At my own institution a critical review of grading practices by our Dean of Admissions and Records and his staff revealed the presence of extensive procedures designed to collect certain grade data which were simply being recorded on the record and promptly forgotten. They were not used by any member of the faculty and staff nor did they come to focus on any academic decision process. The inertia of past practice had resulted in the routine collection and maintenance of irrelevant information.

If we were to analyze and document all of the operating procedures now used in our offices, most of us would be surprised to learn of overly complicated processes, the presence of unneeded information, and the uses of procedures which were directly contrary to policy (or at least the inquiry would make public hidden questions about the true character of policy). The expenditure of just a few man hours of one of your clerks or a graduate assistant will often reveal ways in which change in procedures can improve the quality of services rendered, often with no requirement for additional financial support.

A number of additional ways in which we can increase our quality of service in admissions and records could be found. The point

Figure 7.

Review of Operating Procedures



is simply this. The admissions officer/registrar who continually and critically evaluates:

Organizational Goals

Patterns of Staffing

Contribution of Technology

Adequacy of Procedures

is more than a mechanic. He is a professional in the truest sense of the term. He is the one whose performance is most likely to generate the trust and confidence necessary for the adoption of new program ideas.

THE EVALUATION OF PROGRAM PLANS: AN EXTERNAL VIEW

Those of our colleagues who have engaged the rigor of the management questions posed in our discussion thus far may find that they need less money instead of more, fewer clerks instead of more. This, of course, borders on heresy, but it does not disturb the truth of our obligation as educational managers. Our job is to deliver the best of services in the most efficient way possible. But now suppose that we see the need for improvement of some service or need additional resources just to stay even. What yardsticks are likely to be applied in the evaluation of our program plans?

(1) Does the past performance of the admissions officer/ registrar and his office inspire trust in his ability?

Like it or not the success of a new program plan may rest for the large part on our reputation and past performance. Indeed, I am inclined to think that this may be the most important factor in the evaluation of any program proposal. This makes the questions in our previous discussion even more pertinent, for the best preparation for the future is yeoman performance today.

(2) Does this program plan harmonize with and further the overall goals of the institution?

It should come as no surprise to expect that our program plans will be examined for their congruence with the larger goals of the institution. An idea which is at variance with accepted goals of our institution is not likely to see the light of day--unless there exists clearly acceptable reasons for the variance or unless the proposal suggests more vital new directions for our institutions.

(3) Is the proposal constructed in a clear fashion so that costs and benefits are clearly explicit. Are alternatives provided?

The best of ideas may become the victim of disaster if it is presented in such a way that benefits and limitations of the proposal are not immediately clear. Get the best information you can on the costs of your proposal. Be sure to distinguish between those costs which are "one time" or "start up" costs and those which will continue as long as the program is in operation. What benefits will accrue

from the idea and to whom. Inclusion of such data makes the value judgment more explicit as others evaluate your proposal. Is there only one way of producing the result desired. Include reasonable alternatives in terms of cost, but do not complicate the simplicity of a good proposal and thus dissipate the force of your idea.

(4) Is the need for this program more critical than other institutional programs?

One of the factors that will play an important part in the acceptance or rejection of your program plans is that of need, which also embraces an element of timing. Let me illustrate. If your campus grows more restless because of an outdated registration system which is a burden to both faculty and students, then the time may be ripe for a new plan. In all fairness, however, we should say that our professional obligation is to anticipate crisis where possible. To do this we may need to reach into the future and show that our ideas may prevent crisis five and ten years away. The current pace of change in all of our lives means that we can no longer afford to risk riding the crest of crisis because there is a good probability that we could end up in chaos. However, this point notwithstanding, you should be aware of other institutional needs and how your plan may stack up against these. If there's plenty of resources, which is not likely as we have said, then you have no worry. But if resources are scarce, which is probable, then you'll need some feeling for the importance and impact of your plan.

Past Performance Inspires Confidence

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 11

Need For Program More Critical Than Other Institutional Programs

Figure 10

Proposal Clearly Constructed With Costs And Benefits Explicit And Alternatives Provided

STRATEGIES FOR ACTION: A SUMMARY

There is no royal road to success in the development and implementation of program plans. There is no simple recipe which can be used to insure the acceptance of our plans. Thus, in this introductory paper, we have not presented a panacea for proposal approval. Indeed, we hope that our concern has been a balanced one. Many improvements in our admissions/registrar services can be implemented without any additional resources other than more effective management of what we have.

We repeat a conviction earlier stated. The best preparation for approval of new ideas is a job well executed now. The registrar who has a proven record of performance as measured by his institution will have most hurdles overcome. Even when we have this record of proven performance, however, we need to know that the acceptance of new ideas often will have an illogical ancestry. The pages of history are filled with superb ideas which arrived a little before the public was ready to accept them--their time had not yet come. The same can be true in our colleges and universities. We must become sensitive to the timing of our idea, the informal institutional power arrangements which can be used to plant the seed of an idea.

We may find that our idea will blossom forth in an unexpected way or we may find that great diligence and patience will be required to produce the flower of our plan. In this introductory paper, we have

considered some of the factors important in developing and selling new program ideas. The productive application of these ideas awaits your artistry as a professional educational manager in admissions and records.